# Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Center to Prevent Childhood Obesity

# JAMMIN' MINUTE

#### INTRODUCTION

As awareness of the childhood obesity crisis spreads, schools across the country are recognizing the importance of providing higher-quality, more nutritious food, and of re-integrating physical activity back into students' daily routines. With disparate amounts of resources to accomplish this, some schools may be finding it easier than others to make changes that improve children's health. The example of River Terrace Elementary in Washington DC suggests that even modest efforts to ensure students get daily physical activity can have overwhelmingly positive results, and create momentum for building a more comprehensive school wellness program in the longer term. This case study looks at Principal Shannon Foster's and her staff's successful school-wide implementation of "Jammin' Minute," a simple one-minute fitness routine that schools can incorporate into students' daily schedule at any time.

#### THE CLIMATE

Located in Washington DC, River Terrace Elementary is a relatively small public school serving 160 African American students from Head Start through the fifth grade. A majority of students participate in the free and reduced lunch program. "Economically, many of my parents are challenged," says Principal Shannon Foster. "They may want to do better by their kids, but it is difficult." River Terrace currently has one part-time physical education teacher which, Foster says, is all the school can afford. Most students receive one 50-minute period of P.E. per week, though some of the older students receive two periods. Principal Foster recognizes that this is inadequate. "Data shows that children need at least 60 minutes a day of organized physical activity," she says. "So we try to supplement with other things." For instance, River Terrace has tennis and basketball clubs, though Foster admits these activities don't reach the bulk of children.

Efforts to bring more physical activity to River Terrace were motivated in part by the school nurse's general awareness of childhood obesity, and her particular concern for a number of overweight students who were already experiencing diseases associated with excess body weight, such as diabetes. Principal Foster also recognized the need for school administrators and teachers to be better role models. Motivated by their involvement with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation's Healthy Schools Program, a



joint initiative of the Clinton Foundation and the American Heart Association, River Terrace formed a School Wellness Council. The council, which includes Principal Foster, the school nurse, science and P.E. teachers, the cafeteria manager, parents, and a student, meets regularly to generate ideas for improving children's health. Forming the council was part of what Principal Foster describes as River Terrace's "full-scale" endeavor to improve exercise and nutrition standards, including integrating health into the curriculum. It was in the context of this larger wellness effort that, in the fall of 2008, the nurse proposed that the school implement "Jammin' Minute," a simple daily exercise which she learned about through the Alliance's website. The idea was to have students stop instruction at a given time each day, stand up, and do a one-minute burst of aerobic activity that could be connected to a particular subject they were already engaged in. The proposal was presented to the school more broadly, and by the fall of 2009, Jammin' Minute was in full swing.

Each morning, the school nurse announces that it's time for the Jammin' Minute. She first prepares by visiting the Jam School Program's website, which provides sample routines that teachers can use as-is or modify and make their own. The nurse prefers to creatively adapt Jammin' Minute to students' needs, a feature of the program that appears to enhance success. As Foster explains, "One day the nurse might say, today we are going to visit the winter Olympics, let's pretend we're on the ski slope." One school nurse even composed a song to introduce the Jammin' Minute each morning. In this way, an otherwise generic tool has become a part of the school's local identity. Foster says the entire staff participates—even visitors who happen to be at River Terrace when Jammin' Minute takes place are required to join in. Students have become so attached to the exercise, Foster says, that they get upset if they have to miss it. And because it's fun, children are naturally motivated to initiate and build upon it in other contexts. For example, at the recent Healthy Kids conference in Washington DC, students proposed everyone do a Jammin' Minute session, and then led adult conference attendees through the routine.

## POLITICAL SUPPORT AND PUBLIC WILL

By tapping into existing resources offered through the Alliance for a Healthier Generation's Healthy Schools Program, River Terrace gained access to an array of tools for improving students' health, including Jammin' Minute, that they might not otherwise have had the time or experience to develop on their own. But school staff still had to figure out how to implement these tools effectively. Support from parents, teachers, the local school system, and the Alliance were all critical to success.

Foster says that getting parents' support was not difficult, but River Terrace also places a big emphasis on outreach. "Parents are one thing that we're really focused on because regardless of what we do at school, ultimately the decisions parents make are going to create the biggest impact," says Foster. She describes a number of school initiatives focused on building parents' awareness and participation,

such as a family walking challenge, cooking classes, and the "Stepping Tigers Club," in which children, parents, and grandparents walk together after school for 30—45 minutes and keep track of their pacing, BMI, and other health data. "It has been important for kids and parents to see the principal is serious about health," says Foster, "and to make sure adults understand how children can benefit from these programs."

Principal Foster also made sure teachers and staff were consulted and educated before new programs were adopted. For example, before Jammin' Minute was proposed, everyone was already aware that a School Wellness Council was being established. In addition, the director of Physical Education did a collaborative on how physical activity can enhance learning by increasing students' alertness. "It was critical to inform staff of how the changes we were making would be beneficial to our students. Without commitment from staff," says Foster, "you have nothing."

Principal Foster cited "lack of time" as one of the most significant barriers to bringing health-supporting changes to River Terrace. Her packed schedule makes it difficult to research new wellness programs and best practices. Support from a staff member at Alliance for a Healthier Generation has been critical. "I do not have an assistant principal," Foster says, "and if it had not been for [the Alliance staff member], this might not have happened. She has been out to meet with us, offered her time, and has been great about keeping me informed." Also indispensable have been regular opportunities, organized by the Alliance, for schools with Wellness Councils to come together and share experiences. "It's good to see that we are not the only school involved in this."

## **IMPLICATIONS**

River Terrace Elementary School's experience with Jammin' Minute holds several important implications for advocates and policymakers, as well as for administrators and teachers seeking ways to make school environments healthier for children. First, Jammin' Minute can be a realistic and effective "bridge" tool for increasing children's physical activity until schools have sufficient resources to develop more comprehensive P.E. programs. Jammin' Minute is simple to implement, and appears to be a good way to begin instilling healthier life habits. It doesn't require teachers to have any special training, costs nothing, and can be done anywhere, at any time. In addition, all students, including those unaccustomed to regular physical activity or those who don't identify as "athletic," can easily and safely participate. This accessibility combined with the program's creative appeal may help children begin to develop a sense of competency around physical activity, view it as enjoyable, and be motivated to do it on their own beyond the school environment.

While the benefits of small increases in physical activity during the school day should be recognized, the ultimate goal of policymakers and advocates should be ensuring that all schools have

comprehensive physical education programs. Jammin' Minute has worked at River Terrace, but it was just the first in a series of "baby steps," as Principal Foster puts it, that she and her staff are piecing together as part of a larger vision which recognizes that ultimately, children need more than a minute of exercise per day. The success of smaller initiatives like Jammin' Minute should not obscure the reality that schools need more resources—Principal Foster cites lack of funding as a significant obstacle to creating the infrastructure that would enable River Terrace to meet basic wellness standards, including a full-time P.E and health teacher.

Finally, the results of Jammin' Minute as well as other initiatives to increase opportunities for physical activity at River Terrace resonate with what the best scientific research is already confirming: that physical activity does not interfere with children's academic performance, and has the potential to enhance it. Policymakers and educators must discard the outmoded assumption that P.E. and physical activity are undermining learning. While some administrators may worry that interrupting the school day for an exercise routine might distract children and interfere with learning and concentration, Principal Foster has observed the opposite effect. Taking a short physical activity break in the middle of instruction, she says, has improved students' focus. Academic results appear to be turning around too. Prior to wellness efforts, River Terrace had been failing to make adequate yearly progress as measured by federal standards, but is now making gains each advisory period. "Our literacy scores are climbing," says Foster, "and in our most recent interim assessment, our children are showing growth. Our attendance rate is incredible, 97 to 98 percent, up from around 80 percent last year. We're excited about that, and I would like to think the little things we are doing, the changes in the lunch menu, and increased physical activity, have something to do with it."

# CONCLUSION

Educators are doing what they can in response to childhood obesity, a crisis that is visible in schools across the country. With limited resources, River Terrace Elementary has made impressive progress toward creating a healthier school environment for children. Because it has been easy to implement and is cost-neutral, Jammin' Minute has proven to be a realistic step on the way to ensuring that students get consistent, daily physical activity. It is unlikely, however, that these efforts will expand into comprehensive P.E. programs without new policies that mandate daily physical activity requirements in line with current recommendations for children, and allocate adequate resources for implementation.